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What Makes Social and Economic Development Work

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For almost 70 years the world has expended a great deal of effort in the field of social and economic development—and yet the results have, for the most part, been disappointing.

While many have been lifted out of poverty in some countries such as China and India, this has not happened in large parts of the world. Overall, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening; illiteracy and lack of education remains widespread; health care is still not getting to the poor; the disruption sown by war and civil strife is worsening, and the strain on the national resources of poor countries caused by armament programs has worsened.

New problems that hardly existed 50 years ago have emerged: environmental degradation, new diseases such as AIDS and Ebola, and the multiple issues associated with mega-cities and the flight from rural to urban areas. The world has also seen a marked worsening of such problems as corruption and social disintegration.

In the face of all those challenges, our development activities are not achieving the desired results, despite a very welcome change in the past few decades where the old approaches of top-down largely technical and economically driven projects have been changed for ones which evolve from discussions with communities.

Not only are the results of all of the development effort that has gone on very disappointing, one can also point to numerous examples where these efforts have resulted in harm to the societies that they were supposed to benefit. Aid in the form of food to areas where there is starvation, for example, has resulted in distortion of local markets so that local farmers are unable to sell their produce, driving those local producers into bankruptcy, thus turning a temporary food shortage into a permanent state of affairs. Technological assistance has on occasions left poorer countries in permanent need of expensive backup and maintenance from richer countries. Financial assistance has increased the debt and corruption in these societies, as rulers and administrators have diverted funds into their private bank accounts. Instead of making people more self-sufficient and independent, many such projects have led to an increase in the dependency of the poor upon the rich.

In the previous articles in this series, we looked at the ways in which the Baha'community seeks to present the world with a new way of carrying on their development activities. In this article and the following one I want to focus on a new way of looking at the problem, a fresh vision that is radically different from current approaches. In all, I want to propose that since old approaches are demonstrably not working, why not consider a new approach.

Abdu'l-Baha's Formula for Development

Abdu'l-Baha, the son of the founder of Baha'i Faith, proposed a unique formula for development:

No matter how far the material world advances, it cannot establish the happiness of mankind. Only when material and spiritual civilization are linked and coordinated will happiness be assured ... for in material civilization good and evil advance together and maintain the same pace ... Therefore, the material and the divine civilizations must progress together until the highest aspirations and desires of humanity shall become realized. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 109.

Some of the conclusions that I would draw from this quotation are:

- Abdu'l-Baha appears to be saying that all social development plans of action (and this of course extends beyond just development projects and includes all social action) have positive and negative outcomes—no matter how beneficent and philanthropic our aims and how carefully we plan, all plans when carried out have both favorable and unfavorable results.
- Abdu'l-Baha makes the point that if we formulate plans based solely on fulfilling human material needs and developing the material resources in the community—wealth, buildings, technology, etc.—then the net result will be that, at best, the positive gains (the good that will result from the project or plan of action) will equal the negative (the bad that will result). There will be little or no net benefit. It may even be, of course, that the negative effects overwhelm the positive ones.
- Abdu'l-Baha says that only if projects are planned that try to advance humanity both materially and spiritually, then will the good, the positive results, outweigh the negative consequences of the project.

This statement from Abdu'l-Baha is very important. If we accept it, it provides a cogent explanation for the development failures of the last 70 years. Most projects during that period were planned with only material benefits in mind. According to this formula of Abdu'l-Baha's, given more than 100 years ago, we know why insufficient net good has resulted from them—and we know what we can do in the future to ensure that our social and economic development efforts bear fruit and actually help the people they are intended to elevate.